

US and UK are top in teenage pregnancy rates

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

More teenage girls in the United States and United Kingdom become pregnant than anywhere else in the developed world, because they are poorly prepared for life in a modern and sexualised society, says a report out this week.

The United States has topped a table of teenage pregnancy rates put together by Unicef's Innocenti Research Centre in Italy, which looked at births among teenagers in 28 of the world's wealthiest nations.

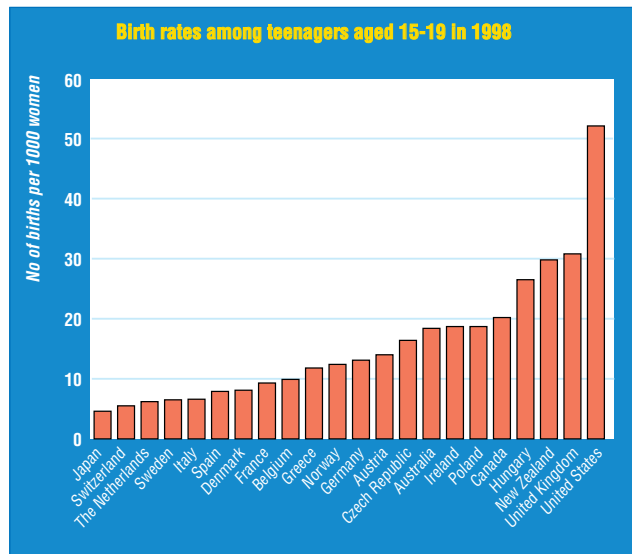
Altogether, 52 out of every 1000 girls aged between 15 and 19 in the United States gave birth, while the United Kingdom topped the list in Europe—and came second overall—with just over 30 births in 1000 teenagers. At the other end of the scale Korea, Japan, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Sweden had a rate of less than seven births per 1000 teenagers.

The researchers estimated that in the next 12 months at least 1.25 million teenagers in the

world's wealthiest countries will become pregnant and three quarters of a million will become mothers. And, according to specially commissioned research from the University of Essex, teenagers who keep their baby are twice as likely to end up living in poverty than those who delay motherhood.

The eightfold difference in birth rates can be partly explained, the report says, by the move away from traditional family values in some countries to what the researchers call a "socio-sexual transformation" where sexual imagery permeates all aspects of life and teenagers are under greater pressure to experiment with sex. But the report adds that equally important is how these countries prepare their young people to cope with modern life.

Some countries, such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, and France, have "travelled far down the road from traditional values", but they have



also made "successful efforts to prepare their young people to cope with a more sexualised society."

By comparison the United States and the United Kingdom are secretive and embarrassed about contraceptive services. After interviewing young people about sexual services, the UK government's Social Exclusion Unit concluded: "The universal message received from young

people is that the sex and relationship education they receive falls far short of what they would like to equip them for managing relations as they grow into adulthood."

By tackling teenage births governments have the chance to reduce poverty and its "perpetuation from one generation to the next", says the report. □

The report is at www.unicef-icdc.org

PFI critic rebuts criticism from select committee

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

Professor Allyson Pollock, head of the Health Policy and Health Services Research Unit, University College London, and one of the leading critics of the government's private finance initiative (PFI), has written to David Hinchliffe MP, chairman of the Commons health select committee, protesting about the committee's recent report (18 May, p 1173).

She has asked the committee to withdraw paragraphs 65 to 69 of the report, *The Role of the Private Sector in the NHS*, which was published last month and which criticised the work of her unit.

Professor Pollock says in her letter: "The damaging remarks are based on an inaccurate account of the committee's own proceedings, including oral evidence and written memoranda,

and of our research.

"The rebuttal by the unit details the serious flaws made in paragraphs 65 to 69 of the report. The work of the unit includes several reports and peer-reviewed papers analysing the government's current policy on the Private Finance Initiative, and its detrimental effect in the NHS."

The letter to Mr Hinchliffe says: "We are extremely concerned at the tenor of comments made in paragraphs 65-69 of the first report of the Health Select Committee in which, unusually, the work of a single research unit is singled out for criticism.

"The committee is entitled to criticise the work of this unit. However, the statements in paragraphs 65-69 go beyond the legitimate expression of disagreement to include ad hominem attacks intended to undermine our credibility, and give an inaccurate account of what was said in the evidence session and of our published research. We set out our objections to paragraphs 65-69 and invite the committee to withdraw the comments."

The committee said that it was unimpressed with the work of the unit and that its arguments had confused criticism of capital charges introduced in 1991 with criticism of the PFI.

Professor Pollock denied that the unit had ever confused the two issues, saying that it has always drawn a distinction between them. She adds: "The committee may disagree with our conclusions, but we cannot accept that it is entitled to accuse us of confusing issues which we have been at pains to distinguish, both in the evidence session, in our written memoranda, and in previous publications and to then use this inaccurate accusation as the basis for an assault on our credibility."

She also denied that when she and colleagues gave evidence to the committee they had claimed that there had been no checks against any tests of value for money. "The claims that we are alleged to have made are not recorded in the minutes of evidence. The transcript shows that our references are to checks of value for money studies after

project completion, not before."

The committee also criticised Professor Pollock for allegedly saying: "There is a new pact with big business which is not operating currently in favour of the population." The report said that this comment was "so extreme as to undermine confidence" in the unit's analysis.

But Professor Pollock pointed out that the reference to "a new pact with big business" simply picked up the language used by Dr Doug Naysmith, MP for Bristol North West, who asked what he confessed was "a political question." He had asked: "Basically what you are saying is the government fill their pockets with big business."

Mr Hinchliffe told the *BMJ*: "I attempted to delete this section of the report because I thought it was factually incorrect. The committee looks at all correspondence that it is sent. But I doubt whether the committee will want to withdraw part of the report. It was carried by a majority, albeit a majority of one." □